

Supporting funding for the Arts and Humanities- May 18, 2006

Rep. Slaughter's Remarks on the NEA/NEH Amendment to H.R. 5386, the Interior Appropriations Bill

May 18, 2006

M. Speaker,

Over the last forty years, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities have proven themselves time and again to be among our country's most valuable and successful organizations.

Their reach is national, and their impact profound.

As the chart on my right shows, the arts are tremendously beneficial to our economy, generating 134 billion dollars annually in economic activity. Artistic endeavors return some 10.5 billion dollars to the federal government in income taxes every year. And the arts support nearly 5 million full-time jobs.

When our children have arts education in their lives, they score higher on their SATs, have greater self-confidence, and are more focused on their studies.

I stand before you today to urge a stronger federal commitment to the arts by supporting this amendment to provide modest increases to NEA and NEH of 5 million dollars each.

Unless we provide an overall increase for NEA, popular programs like Challenge America and the Big Read will be slashed-and the programs will reach fewer people.

Challenge America has enhanced America's communities through direct grants for arts education, at-risk youth, cultural preservation, community arts partnerships, and improved access to the arts for all Americans-with local programs in every single congressional district.

Because of the NEA, more children have music in the classroom today than ever before...

...high school students are participating in poetry sessions and learning more about Shakespeare...

...and our brave men and women serving on military bases throughout our country are being entertained by popular opera performances.

NEA's Big Read program has resulted in committed partnerships among local government officials, schools, libraries, and arts organizations to address the national decline in literary reading.

As part of the program, a book is selected, and everyone in the community is encouraged to read and discuss it.

It's that simple - and the first 10 pilot programs now underway have proven to be overwhelmingly successful.

Neighbors are theorizing about the Great Gatsby, friends are locked in heated debate about To Kill a Mockingbird, and coworkers are analyzing Fahrenheit 451.

Imagine the conversations, connections, and community enrichment that will be generated if NEA expands the Big Read into 100 communities, as currently planned.

The value of the NEH and NEA to our society should no longer have to be proved. The real question is, will this

Congress-with its patriotism and pride in America-prioritize the betterment of its culture?

As you can see from the chart on my left, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we funded the NEA at 170 million dollars. The NEA was last funded at this amount in 1994, and it has never recovered from the 40 percent budget cut it experienced the next year.

As a result, today, its invaluable programs remain seriously underfunded.

The increases I propose today are modest, but without adequate funding, the NEA and NEH will be unable to continue these, and other, important programs.

I urge Members to vote for the Slaughter/Shays/Dicks/Leach/Price amendment, to preserve its funding in the final conference report, and I thank my colleagues who have joined me today.

I reserve the balance of my time.